NEW LITERARIA-
An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities
Volume 8, No. 1, March, 2026, PP. 79-85
ISSN: 2582-7375
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2026.v08i1.010
www.newliteraria.com

Manoeuvring through A World in Ruins as a Person with Disabilities: A Study of Select Stories from *Rebuilding Tomorrow*

Erica Florence Machado T[1] & Dr. Ramana Devika[2]
1. Research Scholar, Department of English, Ethiraj College for Women (Autonomous), Chennai, India
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ethiraj College for Women (Autonomous), Chennai, India

Abstract
Regarded as the largest minority group, with over 10% of the world's population, disabled individuals have long been silenced and marginalised. The collective effort of these individuals to voice out for their rights resulted in the Disability Civil Rights Movement, which gained momentum in the late twentieth century, marking a shift in the way people with disabilities were perceived and treated across countries. Taking on the ideologies of the movement emerged literary disability studies, a field of study aimed at authentic representations of disability and disabled individuals in literature. There has been a significant increase in disability representation in contemporary literature since, but these individuals are often sidelined in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, as the narrative primarily depicts disability either as a burden or as a weakness to be overcome. Breaking free from these traditional tropes is *Rebuilding Tomorrow*, a groundbreaking short story anthology in this genre, featuring protagonists with varied disabilities facing a world that has been severely devastated. Published in 2020 and written by authors with disabilities, these characters power through the odds of survival. Embracing their true self, they begin building communities. By analysing particular stories from the anthology, this paper aims to explore the realistic portrayal of disabled characters and their experience of living in the post-apocalyptic world. Challenging existing stereotypes of pity and supercrip, the paper highlights the humanising representation of disabled individuals and examines how disability is never a barrier but a distinct way of navigating through life.

Keywords: Apocalyptic fiction, Disability, Representation, Resilience, Communal living.

Introduction:

As a form of art, literature is a body of written work that explores the lives of human beings through both fictional and non-fictional accounts. It further offers a social commentary by reflecting on the cultural and political realities of the time. Though disability has been

Article History: Received: 30 November 2026. Revised: 17 February 2026. Accepted: 17 February 2026. First published: 01 March, 2026.

Copyright: © 2026 by the *author/s*.

License: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Published by: Adrija Press, India.
Citation: Machado Florence Erica & Devika Ramana. Manoeuvring through A World in Ruins as a Person with Disabilities: A Study of Select Stories from *Rebuilding Tomorrow*. *Newliteraria Journal* 8:1, 79-85. https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2026.v08i1.010

represented in literature across history, the real debate arises regarding the nature of disability representation. For several centuries, disability was seen as a medical condition that needed a cure, giving rise to problematic portrayals of disabled characters. However, disability representation in literature has evolved with time. The continued discrimination and exclusion of disabled individuals led to the social model of disability, which viewed these individuals beyond their impairment. Shifting the focus to the societal barriers they faced as a result of their impairment, the social model emphasised on inclusivity and aimed at promoting accessibility. Owing to the emergence of Disability Studies, contemporary literature allows for more authentic representations of disability and portrays characters with a wide range of disabilities. Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1974), Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* (1998),
Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015) and Sara Nović's *True Biz* (2022) offer nuanced representations of disabled characters in contemporary fiction.

Nevertheless, disabled characters have often been portrayed as victims when it comes to apocalyptic fiction, as their lives are traditionally perceived to be marked by tragedy. Most writers of apocalyptic fiction shed no light on the realities of living with a disability and often use disability as a metaphor to elevate the dramatic effect of the narrative. Portrayal of characters with disability is quite often omitted. Even if included, they have often been representations of pity and fear. Considered to be a liability, the actual experiences of disabled individuals have been sidelined for the most part. While able-bodied characters have always been associated with resilience, disabled characters have been viewed as highly vulnerable. Challenging this narrative, recent novels and short stories in this genre, have begun to portray the nuances of being disabled and what it takes for a disabled individual to navigate through the apocalyptic scenario. Francesca Haig's *The Fire Sermon* (2014), Travis Norwood's *Sugar Scars* (2015) and Corinne Duyvis' *On the Edge of Gone* (2016) are a few fictional works that perfectly analyse the reality of living with a disability during or immediately after an apocalypse.

Published in 2020, *Rebuilding Tomorrow* edited by Tsana Dolichva, is a celebrated anthology that exclusively focuses on the experiences of protagonists with a disability. Written by authors with disabilities, the short stories feature first-hand portrayal of protagonists with diverse physical and cognitive impairments. Shattering existing stereotypes of disabled characters as objects of pity or supercrips who have overcome their disability, the narrative moves beyond mere survival to highlight the rebuilding of societies in the post-apocalyptic world. They are depicted as individuals who embrace their disability identity while tackling the challenges of both their impairment and the world now in ruins. As individuals who have lived before the apocalypse, they seek to create inclusive societies, fostering accessibility to both able and disabled individuals.

The Evolution of Disability Studies

Primarily viewed as outsiders in the society, individuals with disabilities have always been looked at as the 'other'. They have been perceived to be highly dependant and as objects of pity. In the Classical and Medieval Period, disability was seen through a religious and superstitious lens. Their impairments were interpreted as marks of curse or a result of their sins. The concept of 'Freak Shows' during the time, used individuals with visible disabilities for public entertainment by making fun of their disability. During the Renaissance Period, the medicalisation of disability gained prominence, with special focus on finding a cure for it. Disability began to be increasingly studied and monitored. Taking on the ideas of disability as a medical condition, the nineteenth and early twentieth century views on disability were stigmatised. Due to the high mortality rate caused by the World Wars, there was a desire for a 'fit population'. This subsequently led to the Disability Civil Rights Movement in the late twentieth century.

The Disabled People's Movement has revolutionised global understandings of

> disability. By raising the personal experience of disabled people as the primary source of
> knowledge and identifying disability as a social problem that should be addressed by socio-political interventions, the Disabled People's Movement has politicised disability. (Goodley, 2010, p. 3)

The movement which began in the United States of America aimed to bring the needs of disabled individuals to the attention of the general public. Through this emerged the field of disability studies and by the late twentieth century, it "became an established discipline in the US and UK and beyond" (Watson, 2007, p. 2).

The foundations of Disability Studies is deeply rooted in its idea of distinguishing between impairment and disability. While "impairment refers to a biological or physiological condition that entails the loss of physical, sensory, or cognitive function", "disability refers to an inability to perform a personal or socially necessary task because of that impairment or the societal reaction to it" (Berger & Wilbers, 2021, pp. 5-6). Opposing the social exclusion of disabled individuals, Disability Studies defies existing norms of disability as a medical problem and propagates it as a social one. As Lennard J. Davis states, "the problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the problem of the disabled person" (2013, p. 1). Understanding these ideologies of normalcy, impairment, and disability, Disability Studies is "an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that includes representation from the social sciences, the humanities, and the medical, rehabilitation, and education professions" (Berger, 2013, p. 3). "It is a way for people with disabilities to stare back at those who have stared at them" (Berger, 2013, p. 3). It further seeks to reveal "the complex web of social ideals, institutional structures, and government policies" (Linton, 1998, p. 10) that govern the lives of disabled individuals.

A Disabled Mother's Relentless Quest for Antibiotics in "Textbooks in the Attic"

Set in the flooded region of Iowa, in a future America, "Textbooks in the Attic" written by celebrated writer S. B. Divya, is the defining story in *Rebuilding Tomorrow* (2020). It follows the life of Menaka, a biologist, who lives with her husband Jin and their son Rishi. Ravaged by continuous rains leading to tornadoes and floods, the town is divided into two sections. The privileged members live in walled safer homes, with better accessibility to resources, and are referred to as the Uphill community. The less privileged ones, referred to as the Downhill community, live in the plains and travel by boats from one place to the other. As "every part of the world faced climatological problems" (Divya, 2020, p. 78), there is a shortage of essential medical supplies, leaving the people of Iowa struggling for antibiotics. Batches of essential medicines arrive at Uphill occasionally, but they are never given to the members of Downhill. As a member of the Downhill community, Menaka is in dire need for antibiotics as Rishi's hand is infected due to a cut. She is instantly reminded of the way she lost her left hand. Having injured her hand in the propellor of her boat during the floods, she was infected with sepsis. With no proper medication available, Menaka's left hand had to be amputated. Hence, she lost most of her left hand at a young age and has been using a prosthetic arm since. Worried that something similar might happen to Rishi, she immediately begins reading on the making of penicillin from her deceased father's medical books in the attic. A very close-knit community unlike Uphill, most of the children of Menaka's neighbours had died due to bacterial infections not treated properly. Determined to not lose her son in a similar fashion, she says,

> How much longer can we go on like this? We need to take charge of our own destiny. We've already done it in a hundred ways—we grow most of our own food, we repair our houses, we teach our children, we make our own electricity. Now we'll treat our own illnesses. (Divya, 2020, p. 84)

Specialised in horticulture, Menaka begins the process of penicillin production from mould. One of the most important discoveries in history, penicillin is an effective antibiotic for bacterial infections. The process usually takes a week's time and as someone trying this for the first time, Menaka is completely focused so as to avoid any mistake. She firmly believes that this could save her son. Keeping aside all her doubts and fears, she says, "starting the

Penicillium culture left me feeling powerful, the same way I felt after the first year that our neighbourhood grew its own crops" (Divya, 2020, p. 87). The first batch does not emerge successful so she immediately begins with the next batch. On the other hand, Rishi's infection intensifies, resulting in fever and severe pain. Unable to see his son suffering, Jin decides to revolt against the Uphill community for not providing any medical support to the ones Downhill. Doctor Mitchell, one of the doctors from Uphill, who once treated Menaka's injured hand, informs her that Jin has been jailed for his revolt. She sneaks in some antibiotics for Rishi against the will of the doctors in Uphill. She firmly states, "we took an oath when we became doctors, and I for one intend to uphold that" (Divya, 2020, p. 89).

As days pass, Rishi's wound heals but Menaka is set on her penicillin production, wanting to begin a hospital for the members of the Downhill community. Testing the penicillin under the microscope, she realises that it's worked. Teary-eyed, she is able to pass it to Jin who has been stabbed in jail. The penicillin proved effective and helped him recover soon. Along with Paul, her lab mate, she takes the first step towards a larger production of penicillin and is able to produce "Certified Grade A Penicillin" (Divya, 2020, p. 95). Following this, Menaka successfully opens an hospital in Downhill with Doctor Mitchell as the chief. Being disabled does not stop Menaka from providing support to her community. She emerges as a strong individual whose initiatives lead to the saving of numerous lives.

An Autistic Seashell Painter's Understanding of Memory and Grief in "All the World in Seafoam Green"

One of the most compelling short stories in the collection, "All the World in Seafoam Green" by Lauren Ring follows a short yet significant day in the life of an autistic seashell painter. Living in a small town named Quarantine Cove, Kate Keller has lived through the deadly pox that struck the entire globe. Having lost all her dear ones during the pox, she lives alone, barely interacting with the others in the town. Life had become difficult but "the intricacy of seashell painting allowed her to narrow her focus to a grain of sand, blocking out any noise or confusion" (Ring, 2020, p. 30). Her love for painting helped her navigate through life despite her grief. Characteristic of her autistic self, Kate loved being alone and took to nature to find solitude. Living near the sea, she mentions that "the ocean was the oldest friend she had left" (Ring, 2020, p. 31).

Painting an empty landscape on a seashell one day, Kate finds a young woman her age, in pox-marked skin, arriving near the shore in a boat. Initially Kate does not recognise her, but thinks to herself that it might be a fisherwoman from the neighbouring town or maybe someone from her own town who has styled her hair and clothing differently. The fact that "she never recognised anyone's face" (Ring, 2020, p. 31), mirrors the challenge of face recognition that most autistic individuals face. When the woman approaches her and does not introduce herself, Kate still warmly welcomes her. Autistic individuals "tend to become attached to routines and can become anxious when these routines are disrupted" (Berger & Wilbers, 2021, p. 9). Though Kate's task at hand was interrupted, she decides to help the woman. Making sure not to offend her, she speaks in a tone that she might have used when meeting a known person. But Kate is stunned by the woman's immediate cry. She instantly gives her a cloth to wipe her tears. She shortly realises that it is the same cloth she uses to wipe drops of paint. Taken aback by Kate's warmth, the woman wipes her face with the cloth. The smeared paint reveals her scars caused by the pox. It was evident through the marks on her face and forehead, that the pox had been terrible on her. As someone whose witnessed the effects of the pox first-hand, Kate does not leave her side as she cries. The woman then introduces herself as Shira from Bay Quarantine Two. Well aware that she wasn't naive and that she usually misses signs of danger, Kate decides to get the opinion of someone else from the town regarding Shira. She then informs the gentlest of the elected leaders regarding her.

Having completed her duty, Kate gets back to continue her painting when she notices Shira standing by the sea. Setting her shell aside, Kate goes to meet her. During their conversation, Shira requests her if she could paint a portrait of her wife, who died due to the

pox. She says, "I lost everything I had of her in the quarantine, between relocation and decontamination, and I'm afraid I'm forgetting her face too" (Ring, 2020, p. 35). Though it was an earnest request, Kate couldn't immediately agree to it. It had been years since she painted a portrait and she was herself spending hours missing her dead friends and going through their photos and letters. But the thought of not having any memory of a loved one, broke her heart. Taking Shira to her studio, she sets up a canvas to paint. On Shira's request, Kate decides to paint on a shell so that she could wear it on as a necklace, carrying the memory of her wife close to her heart. Moved to tears for the first time in a long while, Kate realises that "no one carried her by their heart. She was left to carry the memories of all her friends, and that was a heavy burden to carry alone" (Ring, 2020, p. 36).

As Shira recollected memories with her wife Cass, Kate began painting a few objects on the shell in seafoam green - "A bowl of soup. A piece of cloth. A pair of hands" (Ring, 2020, p. 36), "A stethoscope. An ambulance. A gravestone" (Ring, 2020, p. 37). These were simple yet important objects in their lives. When Kate asked about the features of Cass, Shira immediately stated that the shell itself holds her memory now and that she will remember Cass every time she sees this shell. "It wasn't the portrait, Kate realised, it was the painting. The process. The memory was in the remembering, the story in the telling" (Ring, 2020, p. 37). Waving goodbye to Shira, Kate's perception on seafoam green completely shifts as she realises that it "didn't look so much like a mistake anymore. Now it looked like a silhouette. The silhouette of a woman adrift in the sea of memory, finally coming to shore" (Ring, 2020, p. 37). The metaphor signifies Kate's acceptance of grief and the value of memory. Her chance meeting with Shira leads to her understanding of the different ways every individual heals after a catastrophe, and that rebuilding one's life after such an upheaval begins within.

Challenging Stereotypes of Pity and Supercrip

> Disability is both a signifier of inequity and the promise of something new and affirmative. It is these in-built contradictory qualities that have given rise to the study of disability:
> which forms the subject and object of disability research and scholarship. (Goodley et al., 2019, p. 973)

It is crucial to note that disability studies seeks to critique the inequality and oppression faced by disabled individuals. But it goes a step ahead by celebrating one's disability and the unique experiences that disability offer to an individual. Menaka and Kate from *Rebuilding Tomorrow* are classic examples of disabled individuals who own their identities. They recognise the distinct qualities shaped by their disability. Their portrayal explicitly challenges the pity and supercrip tropes.

While "disabled people are inevitably shown to be angry and obnoxious, wallowing in self-pity and unwilling to take responsibility for themselves" (Longmore, 2003, p. 123), Menaka and Kate are portrayed as characters who are completely aware of the challenges their disability poses, but never pity themselves for their disability. They adapt to the conditions and are resilient in the face of adversity. Menaka is not a victim looking for a saviour but is determined to save her son and help her community in the long run with essential medical supplies. She emerges as a leader who empowers her community to fight against the oppression of the Uphill community. Kate, on the other hand, rejects the society's concept of 'survival of the fittest'. With most apocalyptic texts featuring able-bodied characters, Kate is a testament to the fact that it is not essential that only the able-bodied ones who survive and thrive in a dystopian landscape.

In contrast to the pity trope is the supercrip trope, wherein disabled individuals overcome their disability and perform the impossible. "These superhumans and supercrips, whose technologised and superhuman power eclipses any sense of human vulnerability, are examples of a recurring figure or narrative template often identified by cultural disability studies critics" (Hall, 2016, p. 11). Menaka and Kate do not overcome their disability throughout the course of the story. They are not miraculously healed. Rather, the authors depict the realities of living with a disability. Menaka powers through her research and production of

penicillin while using a prosthetic arm. Travelling to the lab everyday in a boat during the intense floods is no easy task. But she is determined on succeeding. Moreover, she builds a community that prioritises humanity and accepts individuals as they as. A community that embraces the strengths and limitations of the others. As an autistic individual, Kate is portrayed as resilient. Having lost her family and friends in the pox, she continues to pursue her passion of seashell painting. She silently yet powerfully handles grief. "People with autism have difficulty with face-to-face interaction and may appear emotionally detached" (Berger & Wilbers, 2020, p. 9). Yet, Kate wholeheartedly helps Shira and accepts to paint a portrait of Cass. Her unspoken cry when Shira leaves, highlights Kate coming to terms with her own grief of loosing her loved ones.

Conclusion

The emergence of Disability Studies in the late twentieth century paved way for authentic representations of disabled characters in literature. Considered to be a growing branch of study, Disability Studies has largely contributed to disability representation in contemporary literature. It has led to viewing disability through a multidimensional lens, taking into account the physical and social factors that impact individuals with disabilities. Contrasting with the traditional depiction of disability as negative in apocalyptic fiction, the short stories in *Rebuilding Tomorrow* feature disabled protagonists as active decision makers and not liabilities. While the medical model emphasises on cure, these stories portray how the disabled protagonists adapt to the situation and prioritise survival and not cure. Menaka and Kate are realistic depictions of disabled individuals who adapt to the challenging situation and continue with unwavering determination. Their disability is not depicted as a flaw but is portrayed as a part of their identity. Their positive attitude and flexibility help them to bounce back from any setback. They embody a resilience which is a direct "outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands" (American Psychological Association). In the words of Michael Neenan, "a survivor can be consumed with bitterness and blame while the resilient person is displaying personal growth and pursuing important goals" (2018, p. 8). Menaka and Kate power through the challenges of the post-apocalyptic world. Their unique skills showcase how disabled individuals are equally important for building powerful and inclusive communities.

References

American Psychological Association. (n.d.). Resilience. https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience?clearcache=true

Berger, R. J. (2013). Disability in Society. In *Introducing Disability Studies* (p. 3). Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Berger, R. J., & Wilbers, L. E. (2021). Disability and Society. In *Introducing Disability Studies* (2nd Edition, pp. 5–6, 9). Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Davis, L. J. (2013). Introduction: Disability, Normality, and Power. In *The Disability Studies Reader* (p. 1). Routledge.

Goodley, D. (2010). Introduction: Global Disability Studies. In *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (p. 3). Sage Publications.

Goodley, D., Lawthom, R., Liddiard, K., & Runswick-Cole, K. (2019). Provocations for Critical Disability Studies. *Disability & Society*, *34*(6), 973. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2019.1566889

Hall, A. (2016). Disability Studies Now. In *Literature and Disability* (p. 11). Routledge.

Linton, S. (1998). Reassigning Meaning. In *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (p. 10). New York University Press.

Longmore, P. K. (2003). Film Reviews. In *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (p. 123). Temple University Press.

Neenan, M. (2018). What is Resilience? In *Developing Resilience: A Cognitive-Behavioural Approach* (p. 8). Routledge.

Ring, L. (2020). All the World in Seafoam Green. In *Rebuilding Tomorrow* (pp. 30, 31, 35, 36, 37). Twelfth Planet Press.

S. B. Divya. (2020). Textbooks in the Attic. In *Rebuilding Tomorrow* (pp. 78, 84, 87, 89, 95). essay, Twelfth Planet Press.

Watson, N. (2007). Introduction. In *Disability: Major Themes in Health and Social Welfare* (p. 2). Routledge.

Bio-Note

Erica Florence Machado T is a PhD Scholar at Ethiraj College for Women affiliated to the University of Madras, India. With a particular interest in disability studies, she works extensively on highlighting how disability fiction enhances inclusivity and promotes the realistic depiction of individuals with disabilities.

Email Id: ericamachadot@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0009-0009-4463-9328

Dr. Ramana Devika is an Assistant Professor of English at Ethiraj College for Women affiliated to the University of Madras. With a PhD in English Literature, she is passionate towards teaching and research. Her areas of specialisation include Literatures of Ethnic Minorities, Literary Theory and Criticism. With over nineteen years of teaching experience and eight years of research experience, she is known for being an editor, translator and reviewer for numerous standardised journals and books

Email Id: ramanadevika1@gmail.com